

# GOOSE HUNTING HOURS

For nearly 20 years prior to 1998, North Dakota's goose hunting hours hardly changed. Each day, hunters could begin shooting at 30 minutes before sunrise, and had to stop at 1 or 2 p.m. depending on whether Central Daylight or Central Standard Time was in effect.

Since 1998, in an effort to increase harvest of both Canada and snow geese, Game and Fish Department managers have experimented with all-day shooting hours – 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset – on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The underlying theory is that changing up shooting hours every few days would confuse geese that had become accustomed to evening feeding with no hunting pressure.

At the same time, the theory is that additional hunting hours only twice a week would not put so much pressure on goose flocks that they would leave an area. That was the primary philosophy behind half-day goose hunting regulations put in place more than 50 years ago – that given a time to feed undisturbed, geese would stay in an area longer.

After a decade, the jury is still out on how much all-day shooting two days a week has influenced North Dakota's goose take, either positively or negatively.

The raw numbers indicate a significant downward trend in annual goose harvest (includes both Canada and light geese) in the last 10 years. While Canada goose harvest is generally increasing, snow goose harvest has declined dramatically over the same time.

Part of that is due to annual variation in snow goose reproduction. In years of good production, hunters bag more snow geese because of a greater number of young birds in the flock. In years of poor production from arctic breeding grounds, few young head south. Adult birds are much more wary and harvest is much reduced in years when snow goose reproduction is considered a "bust."

As an example, in 1991 North Dakota hunters shot about 174,000 geese. The following year, with no changes in regulations, the total goose harvest was about 96,000. Almost all of that decrease is related to a lower snow goose take because of a bust in reproduction in 1992.

Similar wide swings occur periodically in North Dakota goose harvest records that span more than 50 years. While annual ups and downs are expected with any wildlife population, it's the trends over time that create greater management concerns.

Over the last 10 years, North Dakota's snow goose harvest has declined from an all-time high of more than 150,000 in 1997 to a historic low of less than 10,000 in 2005. This dramatic decline occurred at a time when the Midcontinent Light Goose Population is holding at a high level.

What has happened is that a vast majority of the snow geese that at one time spent several weeks of their fall migration staging in northern North Dakota are now stopping in southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba,

Canada, where the habitat is similar but hunting pressure is considerably lower.

In addition, many waterfowl biologists believe poor habitat on arctic breeding grounds is also a contributing factor. Juvenile and even adult birds don't find much to eat in or around their nesting colonies, so they may not have enough energy reserves to migrate the additional distance into North Dakota. Instead, they stop at the first place along their migration route where they can get something to eat.

## Half-Day Goose Hunting History

North Dakota first experimented with half-day goose hunting in 1955. Apparently, the study area in McIntosh County was too small (27 square miles) and had little goose activity that year, so Game and Fish moved the study area to the Devils Lake region in 1956 and included all or parts of seven counties.

At the time, the Devils Lake area was a primary goose staging zone, and hunters bagged few snow geese west of U.S. Highway 281.

For the most part, hunters and landowners liked half-day goose hunting. A thorough survey after the first couple of years found that landowners and hunters didn't necessarily think the geese stayed around longer, but they indicated goose hunting was better as long as the geese were in the area.

The statewide goose harvest fell from 21,500 in 1956 to 11,580 in 1957. The trend after that, however, was an ever increasing harvest that reached more than 100,000 in 1970 and more than 200,000 in 1975. These totals include snow, Canada and white-fronted geese, though a majority of the harvest was snow geese.

After 1957, Game and Fish continued experimenting with half-day goose hunting regulations, gradually expanding the area where shooting hours were restricted. From 1967-79, the state had two goose hunting zones. In an area south and west of the Missouri River, goose hunting was allowed all day. In the rest of the state, it was half days.

Starting in 1980, the entire state was included in the scheme that allowed goose hunting until 1 p.m. each day until the time changed. On the last Sunday in October, when we turned our clocks back to Standard Time, goose hunting hours expanded to 2 p.m. each day. Goose hunting hours basically stayed the same until 1998. For much of that time, sandhill crane hunting followed the same format.

## Changes in Goose Populations and Migrations

Since the 1960s, goose populations, including light geese and the various Canada goose subpopulations that frequent North Dakota, have increased. Because of that, it's hard to say how much half-day hunting has contributed to higher goose harvests.

Yet even with half-day hunting, goose migration patterns – especially snow geese – were changing, most likely in response to increased hunting pressure.

Over the 50 years since half-day goose hunting started, the primary snow goose staging area has moved from the southeastern part of the state to the Devils Lake area, then gradually farther west to the Bottineau and Kenmare areas, and now it has shifted north into Canada. These birds still stop in North Dakota, but in recent years they have migrated in later and not stayed as long.

As the Mid-Continent Light Goose Population expanded to the point where breeding ground habitat destruction began to occur, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service allowed states to increase the daily bag limit during the fall season, first from five to seven, then to 10 and finally to 20.

Since high bag limits really didn't add much to the snow goose harvest, Game and Fish began to look at shooting hours as a possibility for increasing hunting opportunities. From 1998 through 2002, goose hunting hours were all day on Wednesdays and Saturdays, but not until after the second weekend of the season. In response to feedback from hunters that even two days of all-day hunting a week was pressuring snow geese back into Canada, Game and Fish went back to only half-day hunting for snow geese while maintaining all-day hours twice a week for Canada and white-fronted geese.

That generated feedback as well, especially those hunters who had to forego opportunities to take snow geese on afternoon hunts. In addition, having different shooting hours for different goose species was not an ideal simplified regulation.

This year, Game and Fish went back to including snow geese in the all-day goose hunts on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

Now, as waterfowl season is well underway, Department administrators are considering other possibilities for goose hunting hours next year. One proposal that will be offered for public input at Game and Fish Advisory Board meetings later this fall, and again next spring, is allowing all-day goose hunting every day at some point later in the season, perhaps late November or early December.

This proposal would primarily involve Canada goose hunting along the Missouri River System, because typically that is the only part of the state where geese are



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concentrated that late in the season. There is evidence that some Canada geese staging along the Missouri River become accustomed to feeding only after the 2 p.m. closing each day.

Since resident Canada geese are part of the mix of birds that stage on the river, and their population, like snow geese, is well above management objectives, Game and Fish is interested in exploring options that would add hunting opportunities.

The other side of this Both Sides essay is how birds will react to any potential changes in hunting hours.

During North Dakota's early Canada goose season, hunting hours are all day every day. While Game and Fish hasn't documented any unusual migration or movement changes, there is some evidence that bird behavior is changing in some areas.

In addition, moving down the Central Flyway, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas all have all day goose hunting. Minnesota closes its shooting hours at 4 p.m. for both ducks and geese for the first eight days of the season, then allows hunting until sunset.

At this time, the Game and Fish Department is not considering a move to all-day every day shooting hours for geese, or going back to half days every day for all goose species. Between those two simplified alternatives there may be options for expanding hunting opportunities. The great unknown is whether adding hunting hours will alter bird behavior so the net effect is actually reduced opportunity.

Perhaps the only way to really find out is to experiment. Before the Department moves forward with any new proposals, waterfowl hunters will have a chance for input.

And this is the first chance.

*What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an email at [ndgf@nd.gov](mailto:ndgf@nd.gov); call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.*

# FROM BOTH SIDES